3895

AN

INCIDENTAL LETTER,

ADDRESSED TO

The Lord Bishop of Sarum,

AUGUST THE *9th*, 1798,

THE DAY OF HIS VISITATION

HELD AT CHIPPENHAM, WILTS.

WITH

SOME OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

IN FAVOUR OF

VILLAGE PREACHING.

BY THE REV. S. CLIFT.

He that is firſt in his own cauſe is juſt, but his neighbour cometh and ſearcheth him. SOLOMON.

CHIPPENHAM:
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BRITISH MUSEUM

AN

Incidental Letter, &c.

MY LORD,

I WAS happy to-day, in an opportunity to learn, from a perſon of your Lordſhip's rank in the Church, the ſentiments which are entertained in the neighbourhood, reſpecting the late increaſe of Diſſenters. In general, I heard with pleaſure, and was only pained to think a perſon of your Lordſhip's rank ſhould have ſuch very imperfect information, on a ſubject confeſſedly ſo very intereſting.

Our principles as Diſſenters from the national religion, are well known, from our numerous publications; or they may be underſtood from a peruſal of the candid Watts's humble attempt to revive practical religion. I refer your Lordſhip to this book, becauſe, in our pulpit addreſſes, we

are more anxious to bring men to a ſolid converſion, than to the meeting-houſe. We have no principles that we wiſh to conceal, or that we need to conceal; we have ſpoken openly, aſk them that have heard us.——But I confine my attention to that part of your Lordſhip's Charge, which reſpects the late increaſe of *Village Preaching*. On this ſubject, I think I am capable of giving your Lordſhip full information, having been acquainted with almoſt every plan formed, and, more or leſs, taken an active part in the work, ever ſince the year 1793.

I. The object is not, as your Lordſhip ſuppoſed, to form a ſeparation from the national eſtabliſhment. The real object is to ſpread the knowledge of Chriſtianity as wide as poſſible, to ſupply the lack of ſervice in the indolent miniſter, and, as private individuals, to aſſiſt the zealous. In proof of this, we have never interfered wherever ſuch a miniſter has been found, but have encouraged our people to countenance his miniſtry, by their attendance.

II. The perſons concerned in this plan are not all, or principally Diſſenters.

III. Reſpecting the method of procuring miniſters, I offer your Lordſhip the following infor-

mation. It is well known that we have ſeveral ſeminaries of learning, well ſupplied with able tutors. From theſe have come forth ſome of the brighteſt ornaments of your church and order, who, after they have left us, have ever entertained the higheſt reſpect for the perſons, among whom they paſſed the earlieſt part of their lives, and from whom they received the firſt principles of knowledge and religion. But as it is impoſſible, from the late increaſe, to ſupply each of theſe villages with ſuch a preacher, we adopt a practice ſimilar to what prevailed in the primitive churches. We encourage the moſt ſenſible, and pious of our members, to go among them, and furniſh them with either manuſcript, or printed ſermons to read. By this means we ſpread religious knowledge more extenſively, while we prevent enthuſiaſm and abſurdity.

IV. The expence is but trifling, in compariſon to what your Lordſhip may ſuppoſe. The love of Chriſt, and a concern for the ſouls of men, are capable of doing wonders. Our miniſters are compelled to ſtudy the moſt rigid œconomy, and we find that by forbearing to purchaſe a favourite book, we can hire a horſe to ride into two villages and preach to a multitude of ſouls, thinking ourſelves ſufficiently recompenſed, if we are ſo happy as to ſave one from the error of his ways.

What additional expence is incurred, our more regular churches willingly contribute to ſupply; as it is our aim to convince the poor villagers, that while we bring them the unſearchable riches of the grace of God, we have no wiſh to deprive them of one temporal bleſſing.

V. The manner of conducting our worſhip in thoſe villages is generally thus: we chooſe ſuch hours as interfere, as little as poſſible, with the ſervices of the pariſh church—We make reading the ſcriptures an eſſential part of the ſervice—We chooſe plain, practical, and intereſting ſubjects; and, as we firmly believe whatever we preach, we cannot be cold while ſuch ſubjects as eternal life and death are under diſcuſſion.—The whole is conducted with much ſerioufneſs, and ſolemnity, equally remote from ſlovenly negligence, and vain parade, or oſtentation.

VI. That ſomething of this kind is wanted, is what muſt be acknowledged, by ſuch as have the leaſt acquaintance with the religious ſtate of our villages. Many of them are ſo very remote from the pariſh church, that the people, naturally careleſs about religion, never attend, and have no intercourſe at all with their miniſters: in the majority they know as little of the moſt remarkable circumſtances in the life of our Saviour, as

of the moſt private incidents of your Lordſhip's, In ſome caſes the miniſter had rather the church ſank down, than bear the fatigue of preaching a ſermon, or go to the expence of paying a curate: in theſe caſes, to teſtify the things which we have both ſeen, and heard, and known, we cannot forbear.

VII. Having no party to form, no reputation to expect, or riches to acquire, we cannot poſſibly have any motive, to extend the continuance of the plan, a moment beyond the time we are convinced it ſhall ceaſe to be abſolutely neceſſary. If your Lordſhip really wiſhes to put a ſtop to Village Preaching, the work is eaſy, and we ſhall rejoice to be at reſt from our fatigues. Compel your clergy, My Lord, to reſide on their livings—to inſtruct the ignorant, and reclaim the vicious—to be as zealous to diſtribute ſpiritual bleſſings, as to receive their temporal emoluments, and our deſign is anſwered; we have provoked you to jealouſy, and it is enough. We ſhall rejoice when the time comes, that, without an injury to religion, we may retire from your villages, leaving them to the care of their pariſh miniſter; and, as we retire, expreſs the beſt wiſhes of our hearts in the language of ſcripture: "The bleſſing of the Lord our God be upon you, and eſtabliſh the works of your hands."

If your Lordſhip ſhould think proper to make further inquiries, I am happy to have it in my power to refer you to a Gentleman of *Sarum*, the Rev. J. A. who is capable of giving it. I beg your Lordſhip to excuſe this haſty ſcrawl, as my only reaſon for troubling you with it, is a wiſh that you might not leave this town as deſtitute of information, on ſuch an intereſting ſubject, as you apparently entered it. With the greateſt reſpect for every worthy member of the eſtabliſhment,

I am,

MY LORD,

Your Lordſhip's obedient Servant,

S. CLIFT.

CHIPPENHAM, *Tueſday Noon.*

I would gladly offer to give your Lordſhip any verbal information on the ſubject, but am obliged to leave the town immediately, on one of thoſe preaching excurſions. If your Lordſhip will have the goodneſs to print the Charge, it will produce a candid inveſtigation of the ſubject, and by this means full information will be obtained.

Observations and Reflections, &c.

IN FAVOUR OF

VILLAGE PREACHING.

SUCH public occaſions as a Viſitation, excite the attention of thinking men among us. We generally conceive highly of the ability of the clergy, and when the body of them are addreſſed by their Dioceſan, upon the miniſterial duty, we ſuppoſe, we ourſelves, may ſhare in the edification. It muſt be confeſſed, we do not go to Church at ſuch times unarmed of ſuſpicion, becauſe our ears have often been offended with very unworthy reflections. If my memory did not fail me when I attended the Biſhop of Sarum's viſitation, or I did not miſunderſtand his Lordſhip, I conceive there was a propriety in addreſſing the preceding Letter to him. In the courſe of converſation

with a friend, I gave a brief account of the Charge, mentioned my having retired immediately after it was delivered, and of intruding the letter I haſtily wrote, upon his Lordſhip. It being written in haſte may perhaps admit of apology; and having reſerved no copy, cannot be ſuppoſed to be recollected free of miſtake. At the inſtigation of my friend the letter I addreſſed appears in public.

The reaſons urged by my friend for the publication are, that the force of vulgar prejudice runs in favour of a dignitary; that what he prepares with deliberation, and ſo repeatedly delivers, upon the ſpot held ſacred, from its being the place where the Saviour's ſufferings are commemorated, is taken for granted, that the common people, with the clergy, conſequently conclude thoſe men againſt whom the complaint of diſſeminating principles in the villages is made, are enemies of the nation, and that their *ſuppoſed* oppoſition to the national church, is ſufficient to render them odious. Though the flame ſhould not be blown by a Biſhop, it having been long ſince kindled, and by different means kept alive, it has been ſufficiently diſadvantageous to our ſcriptural conduct, and moſt diſintereſted and benevolent deſigns. When I ſay, it has been ſufficiently diſadvantageous, I mean to ſignify, that it has made

our work far more difficult than it would have been, were the mind free from prejudice, and open to conviction whenever truth is promulgated. The ſerious reſult is, that all the depravity of human nature remains upon an uninformed people, who are merely taught to venerate an eſtabliſhment—that no other inſtruction is neceſſary than that which is received in it—and that nothing good can be heard out of it.

But whether we conceive of prejudice ariſing from bigotry--from the want of liberality in many of the clerical order—and the ſtrength it receives from the addreſs at the Altar, either from Mr. Archdeacon, or his Lordſhip himſelf at the Viſitation, we are neither to be intimidated, or even diſcouraged. Our ground is good, we are warring a good warfare, and, from the preſent ſtate of the combat, we anticipate a glorious victory. We ſee that prejudice cannot maintain its hold when conviction of ſin enters the conſcience, when a want of ſalvation affects the ſoul, and the ſubject of our miniſtry, Chriſt crucified, gains attention. Were we, by this advantage, to deſign the deſtruction of the church, our antagoniſts would riſe up againſt us with reputation in the preſence of the Angels of God. But as our ſole aim is to counteract Satan, to reſcue ſinners who are led captive by him

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at his will, to advance the Kingdom of Chriſt, and to recover morality in the world, the oppoſition we meet with is an oppoſition againſt God himſelf; and as we have hitherto had proof of its inefficacy, we are perſuaded it will ſpend all its future force in vain.

Notwithſtanding our confidence, it is matter of lamentation, that at this period, men of ſuch eminence as his Lordſhip, and his clergy of the higher order, ſhould be ſo deſtitute of the true ſpirit of Chriſtianity, (which believeth all things, hopeth all things, and which endureth all things,) as to oppoſe a work ſo very eſſential to the reformation of manners, and to the happineſs of mankind. For has it not proved itſelf eſſential? To determine upon this queſtion, let the villages be examined on the Lord's day, where the ſuperficial duty of the clergy is not followed by ſome extra inſtruction, and compared with the ſtate of the people in other villages, where the diſintereſted endeavours of other men, who have no reward but the ſucceſs of their work, to animate them in their labours, have proved ſucceſsful. We are free to ſay, without oſtentation, that as we ſucceed, immorality decreaſes, and morality prevails. Though we are far from ſuppoſing all is done that is neceſſary, yet by having proof that we labour to good purpoſe, no man ſhall ſtop us from this boaſting.

Every degree of ſucceſs, though inconſiderable, compared with the aboundings of iniquity, is an occaſion of joy. To us belongs the exhortation, though not to us excluſive of other ſocieties, "be ſtedfaſt and unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord;" and if we give diligent heed to the prophecies which have gone before, concerning the progreſs Chriſtianity is to make in the world, we may "know that our labour ſhall not be in vain in the Lord." To ſuppoſe that through ſuch a ſucceſſion of oppoſition, and formerly of the ſevereſt perſecution, the diſſenters have met with, that they ſhould ſtand their ground, independant of the power and providence of God, would be to aſcribe too much to human ſtrength.

The efforts to preſerve religion ſolely in the national church, and under the act of uniformity, have been the moſt formidable that can be imagined. If coercive and reſtrictive meaſures had been of God, they would have ſucceeded, as our efforts muſt have been unſucceſsful, amidſt ſuch conſtant oppoſition, unleſs he had been with us. It is happy for this land that Toleration is inviolate, notwithſtanding the daring, and crafty efforts, which have been made to deprive us of this ineſtimable bleſſing. By our beſt lawyers it is conſidered an eſſential part of our Conſtitution, and the fact has been admitted in late diſputes

with the national church, even by her miniſters. Under its benign ſhade religion has not only found a ſhelter, but flouriſhed.

A good man is the workmanſhip of God; and none but God, by the power of his grace, can produce the moral influence eſſential to his character. It might have been ſuppoſed that our great men in general, as ſome of them really do, would bleſs God for the various directions in which pure religion, and undefiled, has manifeſted itſelf. But it ſeems that prejudice, viewing it through a falſe medium, has miſtaken the notion, and with as much ſerioufneſs the clergy are reminded of upwards of forty houſes being regiſtered, for the purpoſe of religious worſhip, as though forty ſtandards had been erected for the ſubverſion of civil government. With a faint hope expreſſed, "*that none but religious, and* "*the pureſt motives, influence the perſons concerned,*" it was ſignified, "*that it became the clergy to be as* "*much upon their guard againſt the* PROBABLE *con-* "*ſequences, as againſt the* EXISTING *evil.*" What is the *exiſting* evil? Houſes are ſet apart for religious worſhip, and people graciouſly influenced, meeting together to worſhip in them. What are the probable conſequences? Diſſipated men like to be drawn from the haunts of ſin, diverted from the public houſes, and turned from a vain converſation to hear truth in its purity, that is likely

to have a proper effect upon their conduct and morals, favourable to the happineſs of families, and the good of the community. What are the clergy to do? To ſound the war-whoop from the pulpit—to edge the ſavage diſpoſition of the baſer ſort of their pariſhioners, and make them ripe for inſult and barbarity, to which they are ever prone of themſelves. A collateral conſequence is, that ignorance abounds, and village public houſes become neſts of iniquity; for it is notorious, that the uſual ſervices of the church, and the ſtrain of preaching in common obſerved by the clergy, has no other effect than to engage the attention to a ſhort lecture, which is ſoon unbent, and turned to the practice of ſin. How ſtrikingly is this the caſe on the feſtival ſabbaths, when, ſince the eſtabliſhment of Sunday Schools, profeſſed zeal for good works connects itſelf with drunkenneſs in the extreme. Churches and public houſes are receptacles of much of the ſame company, who at one time are heard to ſay, "*Lord have mercy upon "us, miſerable ſinners;*" and at another, while they criminally violate the laws of decency and ſobriety, "*ſet their mouths againſt the Heavens, and "utter curſing and bitterneſs.*"

There appears to be one miſapprehenſion his Lordſhip is under, if I rightly underſtood him; and that is, that ſome of theſe zealous promoters

of Village Preaching, are gentlemen whoſe tenets lead them to depreciate the Divinity of our Bleſſed Lord, and that others are the broachers of tenets with which the poor villagers have no concern. It ſhould be known, that with a diſregard for the Divinity of the Saviour, there is likewiſe a decay of zeal for his cauſe; ſo that the villages are not like to receive the poiſon of Arianiſm, or Socinianiſm, unleſs an old eſtabliſhed houſe is within its vicinity, with a lucrative endowment, worthy the incumbent's attention. And we can aſſure our epiſcopal friends, that be the compoſition of theſe gentlemen ever ſo good, it is ſpent upon empty pews rather than upon crowded congregations; for when the doctrines of grace ceaſe to be preached, nothing remains to attract a congregation. If to be ſecure from his Lordſhip's cenſure of Village Preaching is an advantage, the gentlemen of the wide ſcheme have it. They are ſo far from holding it a matter of importance, that, like the national clergy, having haſtily read their ſhort lecture, in the fore and afternoon, they conſider themſelves diſengaged the remaining part of the day.

For many years our more highly revered fathers held the ſame notion. They were rather ſpiritual than active, and piouſly divided that time between the duties of the family, and the retirement of

the cloſet, which the gentlemen who ſupport Village Preaching, by acts of ſelf-denial, devote to that offenſive ſervice.

Since a ſervice of this nature is complained of as the innovation of *Diſſenters*, it is neceſſary to remark of what deſcription they are; for the denomination of *Diſſenter* is of large latitude, and however reluctantly acknowledged by ſome, who unavoidably come under the deſcription, muſt include our brethren of the Baptiſt perſuaſion, the continuators of the Meſſrs. Whitfield and Weſley's work, and that which originated from the zealous deſign, and execution, of the truly Right Honourable the Counteſs of Huntingdon.

This work began more viſibly with the Methodiſts, and by them principally is continued. Many who were originally of the national church, are indebted, under God, to the miniſtry of the venerable men above-mentioned, and their colleagues, for their converſion, and were awakened to attend to the principles of the Diſſenters, by the repulſe they met with from the epiſcopal church. Their partiality for the ſociety in which they were educated, diſpoſed them to indulge in prejudices in its favour, though the effect of the liberal miniſtry, by which they were brought to the knowledge of the truth, diſpoſed them to that modera-

tion in religious differences, which ſhould be preſerved by Chriſtians of different deſcriptions, one towards another. They knew their call to the *Chriſtian Miniſtry*; and though the phraſe has been ſneered at, when they have ſignified it, in their attempts to gain admiſſion into the ſervice of the *national church*, they could not be ſneered out of their conviction, nor be kept back from preaching the Goſpel, by the refuſal of admiſſion into what is *generally eſteemed* HOLY ORDERS. As proſelytes modeſty became them, and their integrity to their after convictions was better expreſſed by a becoming perſeverance in their miniſtry, as *Diſſenters*, than it could have been in loud reflections upon the gentlemen of the Hierarchy.

We have always ſtudied to treat the national clergy with reſpect, eſpecially that part of them who diſcharge their duty with conſcience and diligence; though at the ſame time have reaſon to complain that ſome of them, under a ſuppoſition of their ſuperiority, have not returned us the like kindneſs. The only retaliation we chooſe to make for inſult, is to preſerve diſtance, and ſteadily to perſevere in the diſcharge of our miniſterial duties, in ſeaſon, and out of ſeaſon, as well upon the horſe block in a village, as in a decent pulpit in our more uſual places of worſhip, notwithſtanding the battery raiſed againſt us in the national

church, and the ſhot played upon us from the pulpit, and the altar, of the ſtately edifices, when the clergy are convened to hear the Biſhop deliver his charge.

We too have our convocations, and our charges to deliver on ſuch occaſions. We alſo are under a neceſſity to give a reaſon of our faith and order; and if it falls to the province of a furious bigot to addreſs us, and he ſhould avail himſelf of this occaſion to inſult the clerical orders, thoſe of us who are moderate feel ourſelves grieved. Uſually we keep ourſelves within the diſtrict of argument, and are ſeldom heard to treat the epiſcopal gentlemen with diſreſpect; but, for what reaſon it is hard to be conjectured, many of them on the other hand can never aſſemble at a viſitation, but the Diſſenters muſt be held up to public view, as objects for popular contempt or indignation. The unanſwered arguments in vindication of themſelves advanced repeatedly, are either concealed, or miſrepreſented. As though they were culprits, who could ſay nothing for themſelves, nor had any one to plead their cauſe, they are, in the imagination of their detractors, diſmiſſed from the bar under opprobrium, and given up to the unmerciful prejudices of an uninformed people, who have nothing by which to determine their judgment, but

the *ipſe dixit* of the preacher in the pulpit, and the Biſhop at the altar.

Are theſe things ſo? You know it, Reverend Gentlemen, whoſe ill-judged conduct lay the foundation for theſe remarks. Refer to your manuſcripts, and conviction muſt flaſh in your conſciences.

How copious is the Goſpel! How great and glorious things may at all times be ſpoken upon that ſubject; and ought more particularly upon ſuch occaſions as theſe, wherein you ſhould be admoniſhed of the importance, the ſpirituality, and the extent of your duty! Go——I had almoſt ſaid, and learn of Baxter, the non-conformiſt, of Hopkins, of Leighton, of Jewel, of Burnet, and of Secker, omitting many other excellent names, how to fill up the half hour, while admoniſhing each other what you ſhould preach, and your hearers what they ſhould believe; and if you are as duly impreſſed, as you ought to be, with the worth and danger of ſouls, you will carefully guard againſt a word, or ſyllable, that is not to the important point. Inſtead of placing that as an argument againſt men, who have a zeal of God, in order to hold them up to the contempt of the public, you will break from your trammels with a degree of the ſame zeal, ſtriving to ſave all,

ſucceſsful in ſaving ſome, pulling them out of the fire. However you may be diſpoſed, be aſſured, in the ſtrength of Divine Grace, *we* ſhall go forward, leaving our conduct to be decided by him who judgeth righteouſly. If there be any abatement of our endeavours, it muſt be placed to the impair of ſucceeding years, and the decay of the conſtitution, that muſt be expected to ſuffer ſomething, by the inconveniencies reſulting from our labours. Our zeal will ſurvive our ability, and with reſpect to the obnoxious practice of preaching in the villages, it will be then, as it is even now, "to will is preſent with us, when how to perform that which is good we find not."

We are the friends of order, and would be far from diverting a pious clergyman from the rule of authority, ſuppoſing it were in our power.—Yea, we often cenſure the imprudent zeal of ſome of that order, who have left their parochial connection. Yet we hope that a meaſure of that zeal which turns our feet into the villages, will prevail with gentlemen of this deſcription, to viſit the houſes of their pariſhes, with a Bible in their hands, and diſpoſe them to deliver the truths of the Goſpel at home, to ſuch as will not attend to hear them delivered in the church.

Leſt I ſhould be miſunderſtood, when refering to the truths of the Goſpel, for a conception of

what we mean by theſe truths, I refer you as well to the doctrinal articles, the book of Homilies, and the divinity with which you have been enriched from the writings of your fathers, as in the liturgy. You may part with the houſehold furniture of your anceſtors to comply with the modern taſte, but the doctrines of your church, to which, if you are honeſt men, you ſubſcribe, *ex animo*, and profeſs to underſtand in their literal, and grammatical ſenſe, are never to be conſidered obſolete. They are like the creation of God, always to be reverenced, and like the fruits which have annually been produced, are pleaſant to the taſte. They are doctrines, not only ſubſervient to "*the wrangling diſputants of the ſchools*," but likewiſe "*worthy the ſanction of a ſenate*," ſince ſuch a ſenate as his Lordſhip refered to, judged it expedient to eſtabliſh a ſyſtem of doctrines. In the Articles and Homilies refered to, they harmonize with our *Catechiſm*, and are, as the Pſalmiſt deſcribes, Mercy and Peace in union with each other. The departure from them has been the declenſion of your church; and if the clergy ever conſent to expunge them, the Church MUST fall.

As this child of a day will fall into the hands of my brethren of different denominations, who are alike the ſubjects of his Lordſhip's reflections, and the objects continually laſhed by many of his

clergy, I hope they will permit me to exhort to unanimity, and the conſcientious concern, not to ſtand in each other's way, or to act in oppoſition to each other, but to "ſtrive together for the "faith of the Goſpel," which is the ſame, for ſubſtance, to the Pædo-baptiſt, and the Anti-pædo-baptiſt, the Epiſcopalian, the Preſbyterian, and the Independant, who hold the head, notwithſtanding their difference in matters non-eſſential. While the exertion of man has been for uniformity, God has evidently approved of variety in the external concerns of his church. And they who have his glory at heart, muſt rejoice that, in the aggregate, religion has gained ground, however in ſome particular places it may appear under decay. Our joint endeavours have extended where clerical indifference would never have directed its courſe; and in ſimplicity and godly ſincerity, that is a ſtranger to rigour and impoſition, we have concurred to convey the Goſpel of the Grace of God to the different quarters of the world. The auſpices of Heaven favour our undertaking, and the time is at hand when religion will make its way, without the rigid impoſitions that have long embarraſſed it in this iſle.

It is from ocular knowledge we have of the ſtate of Heatheniſm at home, as groſs, and as productive of as bad practices, as thoſe we hear of abroad, that while we attend to converſions in

foreign lands, we do not neglect to endeavour at them at home. We have not the reſources of the ſtate, the emolument of Abbey lands, the product of the glebe, nor any other permanent reſource, to aid us in our work, NOR DO WE NEED them. We find voluntary contributions according to our ability, are acceptable to the Lord, and that theſe are ſufficient to enable us to proſecute our undertakings with ſucceſs. With our minds devoted to God, with our lives exactly ſquared by the rules of his word, may we prove ourſelves his ſervants, and live continually under the influence of his Holy Spirit. Thus ſhall we beſt confute calumny, preſerve and encreaſe the work begun, and be found treading in his ſteps, who hath ſet us the example, and of whom it is recorded, that "he went about all the cities and "villages, preaching *the Goſpel of the Kingdom.*" I rejoice to have the honour to be engaged in this work, and to prove myſelf, by my fidelity, the ſervant of Jeſus Chriſt, and of my fellow mortals, for his ſake.

12 MR 58

FINIS.